

The Russian Empire in 1900

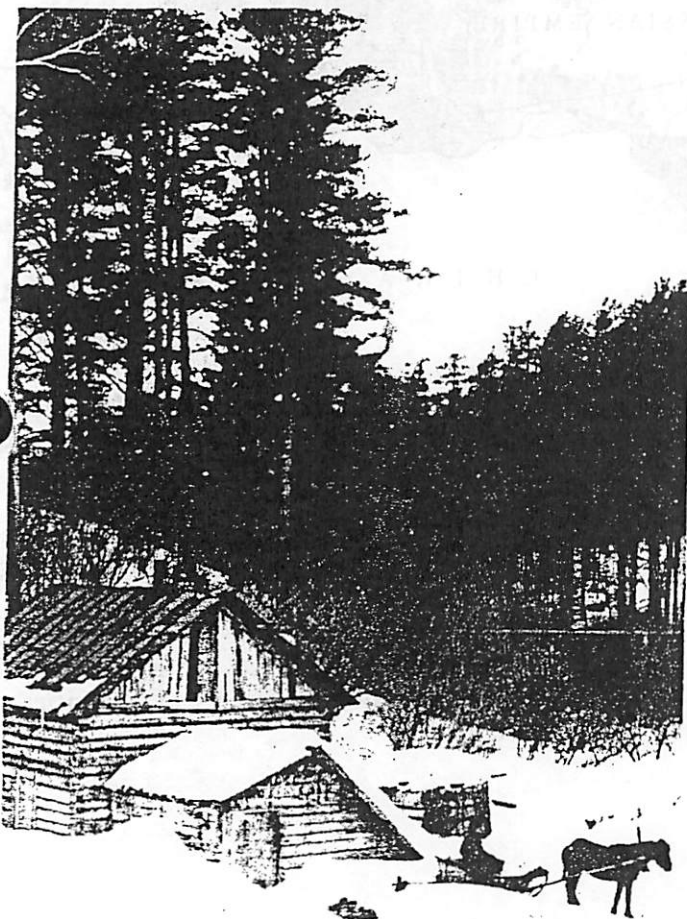
The majority were peoples such as the Poles and the Ukrainians who had been conquered by the ancestors of Tsar Nicholas II. These peoples each had their own language, their own customs and their own way of life. So for six out of ten of the Tsar's subjects Russian was a foreign language and Russian people were foreigners.

The many peoples of the Russian Empire were not spread evenly throughout the country. Most lived on the 5 per cent of land that was good for farming. The cold lands of Siberia, east of the Ural mountains, were therefore thinly populated, while the fertile land of the south-west and the streets of the cities were often overcrowded.

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE IN 1900

Russia is very, very big. You could fit all of the British Isles into Russia ninety times over. It takes over a week in an express train, travelling day and night, to get from Moscow in the west to Vladivostok in the east. Russia is so big that the sun rises in the far east of the country at the same time as it sets in the west.

The land and the climate



Much of Russia is covered by thick pine forest called 'taiga'. This scene in the taiga was photographed in 1880

Although Russia is vast, much of the land is quite useless. Study the map opposite and you will quickly see why. Look first at the southern border. The high mountains there are a good defence against foreign invaders, but they also keep out warm air trying to spread from the south. This leaves Russia open to cold air sweeping down from the Arctic Ocean. For this reason Russia is mostly useless for farming. In the Arctic Circle the land is 'tundra' where nothing grows except moss and small shrubs. For more than

1000 kilometres south of the tundra stretches the 'taiga', cold land covered in forests of pine trees. It is only in the warmer regions of the south-west that the soil can be used for farming. In 1900 only 5 per cent of all Russian land was used for farming: the rest lay waste.

The cold climate affected Russia's industry and commerce as well as her farming. Look on the map at Russia's long coastline. Much of it is inside the Arctic circle and is therefore frozen over with thick ice for much of the year. So too are the great rivers of Siberia – the Ob, the Yenisey and the Lena. Today, massive ice-breaking ships smash channels through the ice for other ships to use, but in 1900 the ice-breakers were not so powerful. The coast and the rivers stayed locked in ice throughout the long winter, so sea and river trade were impossible until spring arrived. A new railway, the Trans-Siberian, was being built to allow trade between east and west all year round, but in 1900 it was still only half-built.

An empire of many peoples

In 1900 Russia was a great empire ruled by a Tsar, or Emperor – Nicholas II. About 125 million people lived in Tsar Nicholas's empire. As you can see from the table below less than half were Russians.

Population of the Russian Empire, according to a census in 1897

Russians	55,650,000
Ukrainians	22,400,000
Poles	7,900,000
Byelorussians	5,900,000
Jews	5,000,000
Kirghiz	4,000,000
Tartars	3,700,000
Finns	2,500,000
Germans	1,800,000
Lithuanians	1,650,000
Letts	1,400,000
Georgians	1,350,000
Armenians	1,150,000
Romanians	1,110,000
Caucasians	1,000,000
Estonians	1,000,000
Iranians	1,000,000
Other Asiatic peoples	5,750,000
Mongols	500,000
Others	200,000